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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet on mental retardation is offered in both English and Spanish. First it provides the federal definition of mental retardation and discusses components of the definition. Causes of mental retardation are briefly noted, and incidence figures are provided. Typical characteristics of people with mental retardation are mentioned. Educational implications are noted, including the importance of early identification and intervention; the value of modifying instruction to meet individual needs; and use of such teaching strategies as using concrete materials, providing consistent feedback, and stressing success. Also listed are three print resources and four organizations. (DB)

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General Information About

MENTAL RETARDATION

✧ Definition ✧

People with mental retardation are those who develop at a below average rate and experience difficulty in learning and social adjustment. The regulations for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), formerly the Education of the Handicapped Act (Public Law 94-142), provide the following technical definition for mental retardation:

> "Mentally retarded means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, which adversely affects a child's educational performance."

"General intellectual functioning" refers to a score obtained on an intelligence test. Persons with mental retardation usually score 70 or below. "Adaptive behavior" refers to a person's adjustment to everyday life. Difficulties may occur in learning, communication, social, academic, vocational, and independent living skills.

Mental retardation is not a disease, nor should it be confused with mental illness. Children with mental retardation become adults; they do not remain "eternal children." They do learn, but slowly, and with difficulty.

Probably the greatest number of children with mental retardation have chromosome abnormalities. Other biological factors include (but are not limited to): asphyxia (lack of oxygen); blood incompatibilities between the mother and fetus; and maternal infections, such as rubella or herpes. Certain drugs have also been linked to problems in fetal development.

✧ Incidence ✧

Some studies suggest that approximately 1% of the general population has mental retardation (when both intelligence and adaptive behavior measures are used). According to data reported to the U.S. Department of Education by the states, in the 1989-90 school year, 564,666 students ages 6-21 were classified as having mental retardation and were provided services by the public schools. This figure represents approximately 1.7% of the total school enrollment for that year. It does not include students reported as having multiple handicaps or those in non-categorical special education pre-school programs who may also have mental retardation.

✧ Characteristics ✧

Many authorities agree that people with mental retardation develop in the same way as people with out mental retardation, but at a slower rate. Others suggest that persons with mental retardation have difficulties in particular areas of basic thinking and learning such as attention, perception, or memory. Depending on the extent of the impairment—mild, moderate, severe, or profound—individuals with mental retardation will develop differently in academic, social, and vocational skills.

✧ Educational Implications ✧

Persons with mental retardation have the capacity to learn, to develop, and to grow. The great majority of these citizens can become

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productive and full participants in society:

Appropriate educational services that begin in infancy and continue throughout the developmental period and beyond will enable children with mental retardation to develop to their fullest potential.

As with all education, modifying instruction to meet individual needs is the starting point for successful learning. Throughout their child's education, parents should be an integral part of the planning and teaching team.

In teaching persons with mental retardation, it is important to:

- Use concrete materials that are interesting, age-appropriate and relevant to the students;
- Present information and instructions in small, sequential steps and review each step frequently;
- Provide prompt and consistent feedback;
- Teach these children, whenever possible, in the same school they would attend if they were not mentally retarded;
- Stress success;
- Teach tasks or skills that students will use frequently in such a way that students can apply the tasks or skills in settings outside of school; and
- Remember that tasks that many people learn without instruction may need to be structured, or broken down into small steps or segments, with each step being carefully taught.

Children and adults with mental retardation need the same basic services that all people need for normal development. These include education, vocational preparation, health services, recreational opportunities, and many more. In addition, many persons with mental retardation need specialized services for special needs. Such services include diagnostic and evaluation centers; special early education opportunities, beginning with infant stimulation programs and continuing through preschool; and educational programs that include age-appropriate activities, functional academics, transition training, and opportunities for independent living and competitive employment to the maximum extent possible.

✧ Resources ✧

Cegelka, P.T. and Prehm, H.J. *Mental Retardation: From Categories to People*. (Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, OH)

Cougan, T., and Isbell, L. *We Have Been There: Families Share the Joy and Struggles of Living with Mental Retardation*. 1983. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN)

Perske, R. *Hope for the Families: New Directions for Parents of Persons with Retardation and Other Disabilities*. (Abingdon Press—see above.)

✧ Organizations ✧

The Arc, (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens of the United States)
500 East Border Street, Suite 300
Arlington, TX 76010
(817) 261-6003

American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR)
1719 Kalorama Road, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20009
(202) 387-1968; (1-800) 424-3688 (Toll Free)

National Down Syndrome Congress
1800 Dempster Street
Park Ridge, IL 60068-1146
(312) 823-7550; (1-800) 232-NDSC (Toll Free)

National Down Syndrome Society
666 Broadway, Suite 810
New York, NY 10012
(212) 460-9330; (1-800) 221-4602 (Toll Free)

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Información General Scbre

EL RETRASO MENTAL

✧ Definición ✧

El desarrollo de las personas con retraso mental es típicamente más lento. Además estas personas experimentan dificultades en el aprendizaje y el ajuste social. Las regulaciones del Acta para la Educación de los Individuos con Discapacidades (IDEA), anteriormente el Acta para la Educación de las Personas con Impedimentos (Ley Pública 94-142), provee la siguiente definición del término "retraso mental":

> "Las personas con retraso mental tienen un funcionamiento intelectual generalmente inferior al promedio existente al mismo tiempo que demuestran faltas en el comportamiento adaptivo que se manifiesta durante el período de desarrollo, e impiden el desarrollo de su educación."

El "funcionamiento general intelectual" se refiere a los resultados obtenidos por medio de un exámen para medir la inteligencia. Las personas con retraso mental típicamente obtienen un promedio de 70 o menos. El "Comportamiento Adaptivo" se refiere al ajustamiento de la persona a la vida cotidiana. Pueden ocurrir dificultades en la comunicación, y en el aprendizaje de habilidades sociales, académicas, vocacionales y en la habilidad para vivir en forma independiente.

El retraso mental no es una enfermedad, ni debe ser confundido con las enfermedades mentales. Los niños con discapacidades intelectuales llegan a ser adultos, no permanecen niños toda la vida. Sí aprenden, pero más lentamente, y con dificultad.

La gran mayoría de los niños con retraso mental tienen anormalidades en los cromosomas. Otros factores biológicos incluyen (pero no se limitan en) la asfixia; la incompatibilidad sanguínea de la madre y el feto; y las infecciones maternas, tales como la rubéola o el herpes. Ciertas drogas también han sido enlazadas a los problemas en el desarrollo del feto.

✧ Incidencia ✧

Algunos estudios sugieren que aproximadamente un 1% de la población en general tiene discapacidades intelectuales (cuando se mide la inteligencia en combinación con el comportamiento adaptivo). De acuerdo a la información suministrada por los estados al Departamento de Educación Estadounidense, en el año escolar de 1989-90, 564,666 estudiantes entre las edades de 6-21 años fueron clasificados con retraso mental y recibieron los servicios de las escuelas públicas. Esta figura representa aproximadamente 1.7% del total de alumnos matriculados durante ese año. No incluye a los alumnos con múltiples discapacidades ni a los que participan en programas especiales preescolares, que también pueden tener retraso mental.

✧ Características ✧

Las autoridades están de acuerdo en que las personas con retraso mental se desarrollan en la misma forma que las personas normales, pero a un paso más lento. Otros sugieren que las personas con retraso mental tienen dificultades en ciertas áreas de pensamiento y aprendizaje como, por ejemplo, el prestar atención, la percepción, o la memoria. De acuerdo al grado de retraso mental – leve, moderado, severo, o profundo – los individuos con discapacidades intelectuales se desarrollan en formas diferentes en cuanto a las habilidades académicas, sociales, y vocacionales.

✧ Implicaciones Educacionales ✧

Las personas con retraso mental tienen la capacidad de aprender, desarrollarse, y crecer. La gran mayoría de estos ciudadanos puede lograr tomar parte productiva en la sociedad.

Los servicios educacionales apropiados que comienzan en la infancia y continúan a través del período de desarrollo y aún más allá permiten que el niño con retraso mental pueda desarrollarse al máximo.

Al igual que con todo tipo de educación, la modificación del tipo de instrucción, de acuerdo a las necesidades individuales, dará resultados positivos. Todo padre debe tomar parte en la enseñanza del niño.

Al educar a las personas con retraso mental, es importante:

- Utilizar materiales concretos que sean interesantes y apropiados a la edad del alumno;
- Presentar información e instrucciones por etapas, y revisar cada etapa con frecuencia;
- Elogiar a los niños en forma consistente;
- Enseñarle al niño, cuando sea posible, en la misma escuela a la cual asistiría si no tuviera retraso mental;
- Poner énfasis en los logros;
- Enseñar tareas o habilidades que el alumno usará de tal forma que puedan ser utilizadas fuera de la escuela;
- Recordar que las tareas que muchas personas aprenden sin instrucción pueden ser estructuradas por etapas, con especial atención a cada paso.

Los niños y los adultos con retraso mental necesitan los mismos servicios básicos que todas las personas necesitan para su desarrollo normal. Esto incluye la educación, preparación vocacional, servicios de salud, oportunidades para recreación, y mucho más. Además, muchas personas con retraso mental necesitan servicios especiales, de acuerdo a sus necesidades. Estos servicios pueden incluir los centros de diagnóstico o evaluación; oportunidades especiales para la educación, comenzando con programas de estimulación infantil hasta la etapa pre-escolar; programas educacionales que incluyen actividades apropriadas a la edad del niño, la enseñanza de las habilidades académicas básicas para ser parte de la sociedad, y entrenamiento transicional; oportunidades para vivir en forma independiente y hasta obtener un empleo competitivo dentro de las máximas posibilidades.

✧ Organizaciones ✧

Asociación para Ciudadanos Retrasados de Estados Unidos (The Arc)
500 East Border Street, Suite 300
Arlington, TX 76010
(817) 261-6003
Se habla español.

A.P.N.I. (Asociación de Padres Pro-Bienestar de Niños Impedidos)
P.O. Box 21301
Rio Piedras
Puerto Rico, 00928
(809) 765-0345

Fundación Síndrome de Down de Cantabria
Avda. General Dávila
24 A-1 C
39005, Santander
España
34-42-338800

Congreso Nacional Síndrome de Down
(National Down Syndrome Congress)
1800 Dempster Street
Park Ridge, IL 60068-1146
(312) 823-7550; (1-800) 232-NDSC (Llamada gratis)
Una publicación en español.

Sociedad Nacional Síndrome de Down
(National Down Syndrome Society)
666 Broadway, Suite 810
New York, NY 10012
(212) 460-9330; (1-800) 221-4602 (Llamada gratis)

Padres de Personas con Síndrome Down, Inc.
P.O. Box 1695
Reseda, CA 91337
(213) 587-6411
Se habla español.

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